

The Role of Communication in Nation-Building: A Theoretical Framework for South African National Unity

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Abstract

Communication plays a crucial role in the formation of a nation and its identity. It is apparent that the government of South Africa has previously started nation-building initiatives, but it is unclear how much the public is involved in the design and implementation of these campaigns. In this study, the contemporary literature on communication in the context of nation-building was critically engaged to clarify the role that communication plays in nation-building. The study concludes that the two-way symmetrical model is the best as it emphasises honest information exchanges between the public and the government through interactive communication. In order to effectively communicate with both internal and external target audiences and advance the agenda for nation-building, the South African government should employ communication techniques that will create and maintain enduring relationships with the public based on mutual trust by implementing participatory communication approaches to nation-building.

Keywords: communication, democracy, imbizo, nation-building, national unity, two-way symmetrical model

1. Introduction

Communication plays a crucial role in the formation of a nation and its identity. According to Chaka and Adanlawo (2023a), people come together as a nation when they are able to share common social communication habits through a variety of media. According to the authors, communication is a medium that enables people in a country like South Africa to share information with one another for novel purposes. Fernando and Wulansari (2021) claim that the idea of patterns for collaboration or integration is what constitutes an understanding of communication. Thus, this has to do with the idea of unity in diversity, as it is known in South Africa. "The right to communication is central to the maintenance of national identity over time," claims Kadirova (2022). This covers the rights to fair representation in the media as well as access to and involvement in the communication spectrum of a country.

Like other forms of communication, government communication is impacted by both the demands and expectations of all social actors as well as major societal changes (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2018). "New approaches in government communication, but also competent professionals, stable organisational structures and operational procedures that enable the implementation of efficient and reliable communication activities" are required in this situation, according to the authors (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2018). According to Adanlawo and Rugbeer (2021), effective use of government communication can help implement political, administrative, and social reforms by bringing people closer to the decision-making process and nation-building initiatives.

Communication is viewed as a marketing tool that should be employed when it is advantageous to the government or when negative press or the media is causing problems. Cynicism among the public and media, as well as frustration on the part of government, stems from a lack of understanding of the role that communication plays in democratic governance. It is noteworthy that an informed citizenry that actively participates in the democratic process is a necessary condition for a robust and long-lasting democracy in South Africa (Chaka and Adanlawo, 2022; Kubow and Min, 2016). Therefore, for the democratic process to continue, such active engagement requires that a citizenry and its chosen representatives

establish communication (Mmutle, 2018). This makes it quite evident that the public should have access to the communication process.

It is apparent that the government has previously started nation-building initiatives, but it is unclear how much the public is involved in the design and implementation of these campaigns. A paradigm change in how communication is approached in nation-building is long overdue. Starting with development communication is appropriate. Building a nation is a process that takes time, and it is becoming increasingly obvious that the methods used in previous nation-building initiatives will not work in the future.

Among other things, the implementation of an efficient communication strategy is required to maintain the independence, cohesion, and legitimacy of the South African political system. In the process of nation-building, communication is supposed to be more than just a chronicle of events or a documentation of regime change. It will mostly focus on the tactics used by the administration and ruling class to maintain their legitimacy as well as the internal and external obstacles they must overcome. The purpose of this study is to clarify the role that communication plays in nation-building. The following objectives have been established:

- To establish the role of development communication in Nation-building programmes;
- To develop a participatory development communication perspective model for Nation-building in South Africa and
- To develop a Nation-building framework for the government of South Africa.

This study developed a comprehensive framework to guide government communicators in dealing with nation-building programmes or campaigns in future within the South African context.

2. Participatory Development Communication

Based on two components, participatory development communication is an organised activity (Li et al., 2020). One component focuses on participatory processes, while the other uses interpersonal and media communication to foster discussion among various publics and stakeholders with the goal of creating and executing a series of actions that will help make it a reality. Participatory development communication places a strong emphasis on two-way communication processes as opposed to one-way communication strategies, which involve distributing messages, giving information, or persuading people to change their behaviour. This favours bottom-up strategies that seek to increase decision-makers' awareness as well as horizontal strategies that involve promoting conversation focused on problem analysis and the search for solutions (Adanlawo and Rugbeer, 2019).

Sharing knowledge, receiving it, and engaging in communion are all examples of communication. The concept of the "idea of communication" has been written about by a number of authors (Cooren and Stücheli-Herlach, 2021; Gilyazova, 2020). Accepting the true nature of communication is a difficult undertaking because it is frequently described as an idea, a process, and a byproduct of processes rather than as a singular thing. Communication is essential, it serves as tool to encourage people to co-operate with each other and take part in the two-way approach of government in development communication

3. Two-way Symmetrical System of Communication

This is accomplished through the following major initiatives: coordinating the government's public participation program (imbizo), creating a two-way information and communication system between the public and the government, and forming alliances with local governments to improve the efficacy of the government communicator system. According to Adanlawo and Reddy (2018), the two-way symmetrical model seeks to strike a balance between the interests of the organisation and its publics, which results in stable, long-term relationships with external publics. Additionally, the authors defined this model as a mixed-motive model in which "organisations try to satisfy their own interests while simultaneously trying to help a public satisfy its own interests."

As an illustration of public communication, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa illustrated a number of contemporary ideas, including symmetry in two-way communication, the Principles of "Authentic Communication," and the fundamentals of communitarian ethics. It appears apparent that the truth discovered through symmetrical, two-way, genuine, and ethical communication was only one stage in the process of public healing and reconciliation with regard to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. However, as demonstrated by the application of various communication concepts, communication can be crucial to public healing and civic discourse, both of which contribute to nation-building.

4. Imbizo as Symmetrical Communication

A traditional meeting held to resolve relevant community issues is called an imbizo in Zulu. African languages have several variations on the word imbizo. For instance, pitso is used in Northern Sotho, and kgotla in Setswana and Sesotho.

Imbizo is a practice used in indigenous African communities to resolve conflicts within the community by fostering open communication between the populace and the leadership. The South African government launched a number of initiatives to eliminate apartheid-era social relations in a number of domains after apartheid ended in 1994. According to Adanlawo and Chaka (2024) and Msila (2021), Africanisation led to the transformation of a number of institutions. In order to foster communication between the public and the government, the latter has attempted to assign native communication styles and problem-solving techniques in an appropriate manner.

The South African government announced in June 2001 the introduction of the imbizo as a means of fostering conversations with the public on matters related to service delivery and establishing a closer relationship with communities through direct interaction. The concept of imbizo is being used by the South African government to inform the public about the creation and execution of its initiatives. Imbizo was created in response to the fact that the majority of South Africans, particularly those living in rural areas, lacked access to government information and services via contemporary media platforms like the internet, television, and radio party (Chaka, 2014).

Everybody has the chance to participate in community-level government through an imbizo. The concept behind the imbizo's introduction as a communication tool which the government uses to symbolise its presence by going to the people and interacting with them directly was made clear in the Government Communicators' Handbook (2005). A two-way communication process is necessary for this kind of interaction, in which the people and the government exchange information.

As Chaka (2014) points out, the imbizo's procedures are centered around its motto, which is "taking the government to the people" by facilitating direct communication and interaction between the populace and their political representatives. It is believed that the government should act as a facilitator. Mathagu (2010) states that the government imbizo system encourages the public to actively participate and be directly involved at different levels in the implementation of government programs. It is true that government initiatives will function better if a communication strategy is implemented that emphasizes building and maintaining relationships, boosting engagement, and promoting cooperation between the state and its citizens.

5. Government Communication

Every aspect of society is impacted by government, and almost all of its functions depend heavily on communication. The goals of democracy and communication are actually quite similar (Adanlawo and Reddy, 2020). It is also critical to remember that a responsive democratic government relies on reciprocal understanding and two-way communication to maintain relationships with its constituents or stakeholders. Providing citizens with accurate, truthful, and factual information is one of the government's most important responsibilities (Hameleers, 2022). This suggests that information regarding government actions, policies, and services must be communicated accurately and impartially in order for the democratic process to function.

The term "government communication" varies greatly among authors, according to Johansson and Raunio (2019). It can be associated with any kind of political activity or have a very specific focus on a single, restricted type of activity, such as political advertising. It goes without saying that the definition's implications have a significant impact on the conclusions drawn about the development, dissemination, and effects of communications activity. Government communications should focus on two different but complementary areas of activity: government communication with the media and government communication directly with the public, according to Chaka and Adanlawo (2022).

Today's government communication in South Africa faces a number of difficulties. In order for government communications to be effective, it is essential that they reach underrepresented groups, particularly the poor. Apart from radio communication, insufficient public infrastructure in the areas of telecommunications and broadcasting hinders this. For the government to expand this infrastructure, a well-coordinated plan is needed. In addition to utilizing the resources and experience of the private sector more effectively, public infrastructure already in place, such as post offices and libraries, must be improved. It takes accessibility and simplicity of language to break down illiteracy barriers in society. Information can also be distributed more easily with the use of new technology, and multipurpose information centres are a useful tool for making access easier.

6. Political Communication

Convincing a government's audience to accept its current, new, or proposed budget, policies, and laws on a national and international level is the ultimate objective of political communication (Chaka and Adanlawo, 2023b; Dunaway and Graber, 2022; Nair, Janenova, and Serikbayeva). Politicians use this strategy to persuade voters in their constituencies to support the idea. Attempting to control public opinion in a nation where the media is owned or controlled by the government can be achieved through influencing the editorial content of all media coverage. The legislative and executive branches engage in one of the most important political conversations in this crucial domain within a democratic

government. Planners of government communications frequently discuss whether to target the public indirectly through indirect messaging or directly at the legislature. In actuality, though, government communicators focus on both target audiences because the ultimate objective is to either directly or indirectly influence legislative votes.

In contrast, the people expect elected officials to support their policies in a nation where press and speech freedoms are guaranteed. However, the public also anticipates free and fair discourse. Therefore, political communication strategy frequently determines public policy, directs the majority of public attention, and handles the most delicate questions from the public and news media (Dunaway and Graber, 2022). Government communicators are advised to handle political direction and coordination, sometimes at the highest levels of the government.

7. Methodology

In this study, the contemporary literature on communication in the context of nation-building was critically engaged to clarify the role that communication plays in nation-building. The study's objectives were approached from a theoretical standpoint. The researcher had to create a participatory development communication perspective model for nation-building in South Africa that could be used by government communicators in order to examine the similarities between two-way symmetrical and participatory development communication in nation-building.

8. Discussions

Two-way symmetrical communication approach of government

taking part in the government's two-way development communication strategy during Imbizos. the implementation of the imbizo as a tool to enhance responsiveness, communication, and involvement in a democratic system. The imbizo's nature encourages public participation and active involvement in the execution of government initiatives (Nkomo and Adanlawo, 2024; Chaka, 2014). This approach by the government is perceived as an interactive communication and governance style that should encourage more direct dialogue between the people and the government. The imbizo is considered a two-way symmetrical communication method when used as a direct democracy mechanism. A village or township gathering attended by the President, Minister, Premier, Mayor, and/or Councilor in order to hear from common people and, if feasible, address their concerns, can serve as the imbizo.

Legitimate public authority is strengthened when there is effective two-way symmetrical communication between the public and the government. Thus, there is a greater chance of achieving outcomes related to good governance. It is in the interest of governments to establish regimes that are competent, adaptable, and responsible. From a communication point of view, Mr. Thabo Mbeki highlighted the importance of two-way symmetrical communication in government, he stated that:

“The principle of two-way communication between government and society is in this (RDP) context, so that people know what government is doing and they themselves contribute to the formulation of policy and take an active part in its implementation” (Mbeki, 1995, P. 2-3).

Governments must, on the one hand, conduct their business impartially in order to preserve their credibility and adhere to expectations of accountability and transparency. However, government organisations also have a duty to promote their own policies. Therefore, maintaining credibility and trustworthiness while promoting policy in a contentious communication environment is a major challenge for government communications. According to Reddy and Adanlawo (2018), integrating and coordinating communication efforts is a problem for the government communication sector. Additionally, in developing a cohesive body of multidisciplinary knowledge that better supports communicative entities.

To further emphasize the aforementioned point, prior research has shown that South African communication practices are directly impacted by the social, political, and cultural contexts of their organisations. Gupta and Divekar (2022) discovered that South African practitioners base their decisions on the current situation rather than symmetrical or asymmetrical considerations. The researchers came to the conclusion that, especially in the institutional setting, communication practices in South Africa have a high social value, meaning they actually contribute to social change and the establishment of equality. The following discussion aims to establish the similarities or relationship between the two aspects.

There are two main reasons why the two-way symmetrical model is significant. First, the two-way symmetrical model increases the efficiency of governmental institutions. From a directional standpoint, this model facilitates free information flow between systems, including publics, employees, managements, and organisations. Symmetrical communication, viewed through a purposive lens, aims to achieve moving equilibrium through mutual adjustment and cooperation. Second, organisations become more moral when they use the two-way symmetrical model. As Adanlawo and Chaka (2021) argue, “two-way symmetrical communication “serves as a mechanism by which organisations and the publics interact to manage inter-dependence and conflict for the benefit of all”. It implies that everyone involved is equal. Building mutual trust between the public and the government can facilitate dialogue, discussion, and negotiation as a means of resolving any issue.

An expanded comprehension of communication as a two-way, interactive, participatory procedure has gradually replaced the hierarchical, top-down perspective of communication (Servaes and Servaes, 2021; Mmutle, 2018). This strategy promoted more localised participation in decision-making. The emphasis on participatory development principles and community facilitation techniques has had a significant impact on the development of participatory approaches to development communication. It is now commonly acknowledged that the most promising strategy for reducing reliance and enhancing peoples' sense of self-worth and independence is participatory communication (Gebeyehu and Jira, 2023). This study notably reveals closer similarities between the two-way symmetrical approach and the participatory communication approach based on the discussions on the two concepts.

The following is considered to be a component of a participatory development communication approach: It influences and organises development processes and results, mobilises people, starts actions, and empowers (Servaes and Servaes, 2021; Steiner and Farmer, 2018). The community's ability to manage itself is strengthened by the participatory development communication approach, which also makes access to major decision-making domains easier. Consequently, researchers had reexamined government-sponsored, top-down campaigns in favour of more bottom-up, participatory strategies (Koch and Hooks, 2020).

This participatory approach has been reflected in the recent handling of development-oriented communication campaigns. Examples include the study conducted by Zhang et al. (2022) on the impact of communication on developing country sectors; Yamada (2016) on the paradigm shifts in development communication theory; and Nurula and Pineli (2019) on the contribution of economic organisations like multinational corporations to development. In order to demonstrate the parallels between two-way symmetrical communication and participatory development communication, the following perspectives from Chaka and Adanlawo (2023) should be discussed in concluding

First, for any training programme to be viable, appropriate, and valuable, participatory communication should be used as a tool to foster a feeling of unity. Second, socio-cultural aspects specific to each context should be taken into account when presenting and revising approaches and strategies for applying participatory communication to development (Chaka and Adanlawo, 2023a). Finally, the phrase "participatory development communication" is frequently employed to highlight the significance of two-way communication procedures. It favors bottom-up strategies that try to increase decision-makers' awareness as well as horizontal strategies that promote conversation focused on problem analysis and the search for solutions (Koch and Hooks, 2020).

To summarise the connection and/or parallels between two-way symmetrical communication and participatory development communication. Through participant reflection and mutual adaptation, the two seek to foster consensus. They assist in creating messages with social meaning by utilizing links that are historically and culturally coded. They actively seek out, investigate, and handle strategic issues (such as morality and social responsibility issues, which are occasionally influenced by the media). By striking a balance between social objectives and promoting social dialogue, they help to improve the relationship between society and organisations. They also establish a connection between the planning and execution of communication initiatives and organisational development goals (Chaka and Adanlawo, 2023).

The contribution of communication function in government: A framework

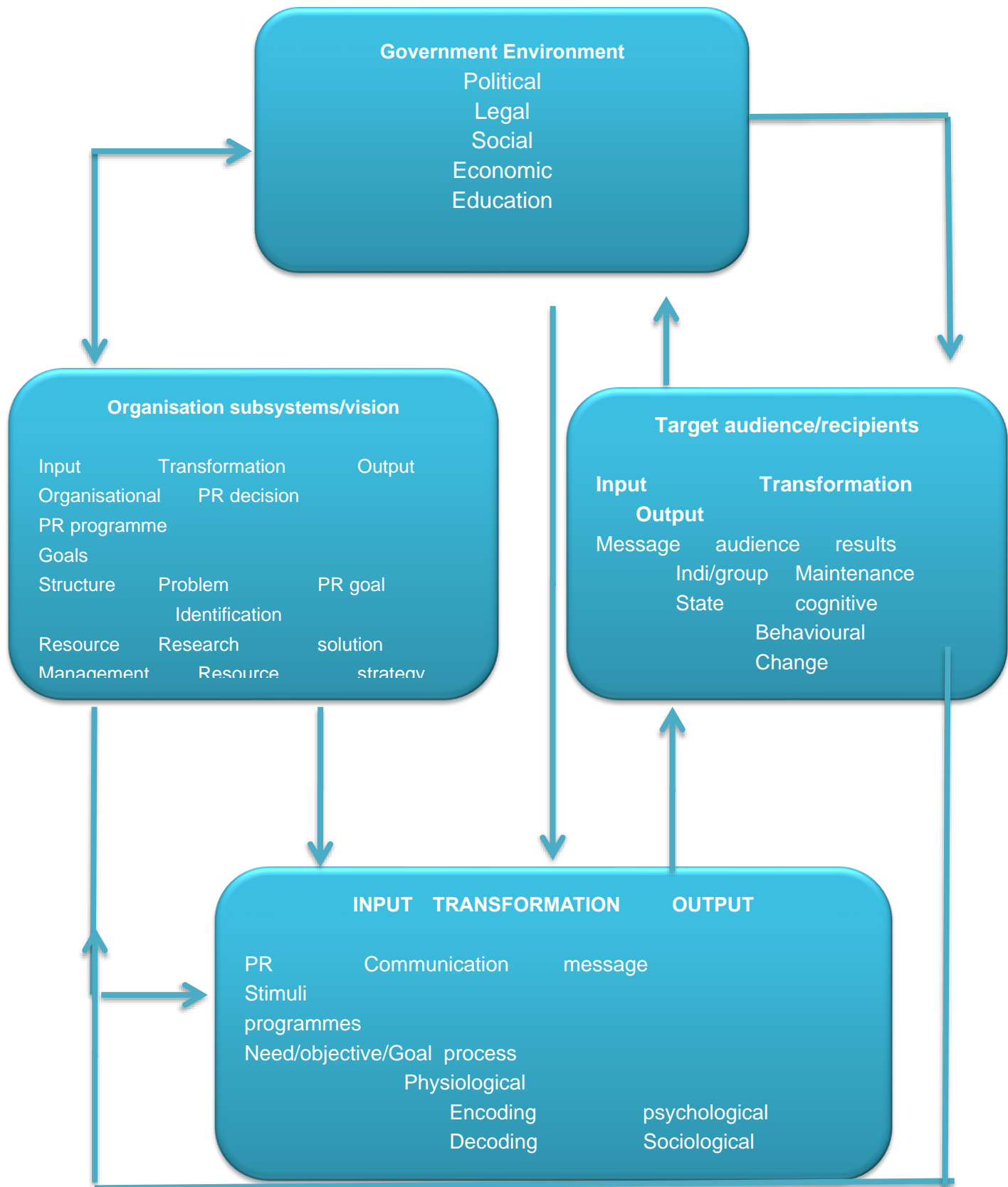


Figure 1. Relationship building-feedback and Action/Goal

This framework's main goal is to improve government initiatives, especially those that focus on social cohesion, nation-building, national unity, and population wellbeing in South Africa. In order for government campaigns or programs to be successful, communication needs to be viewed as an essential management function. Chaka and Adanlawo (2022) argue that public communication campaigns are a resource for nation-building. The authors assert that public communication has been utilised by governments to accomplish national objectives and that communication has been crucial to the process of nation-building in many developing countries.

Similar to this, national identity and nation-building processes in South Africa require participatory communication to change. Such a claim justifies the creation of a model or framework for government communication in South Africa and implies a much larger and more significant role. Practitioners and communicators will have to show how their communication strategy can strategically support the objectives and values of government programs in order to put the model into practice.

9. The Model

The model is divided into four sections: communication practices, government support, resource provision, and a final section that emphasises the importance of situation analysis and/or research. The following three take into account how communication relates to the general administration of government campaigns or programmes:

The model states that government communicators should develop communication strategies and plans based on the ideas of uniting South Africans as a nation and fostering national unity through public communication. This will help them to value communication. Abrahams (2016) asserts that the following communication-based nation-building principles apply to South Africa as well:

1. Relationships are necessary for nation-building on two levels: the interpersonal level and the government-to-individual level.
2. Communication can help to nurture personal relationships. Building relationships can be strategically accomplished through the use of participatory communication.
3. Individuals, communities, and nations, and governments, must negotiate relationships. Compromise, mutual respect, and trust are essential components of negotiation. Campaigns for communication must be adaptable and flexible enough to meet the needs of their target audiences.
4. Social context is used to negotiate relationships. The way the relationships develop will be influenced by this social context. Social and political contexts should support, not contradict, government communication campaigns that promote relationships.
5. Campaigns that empower people to manage their own relationships, cultivate trust, and offer intimacy will be advantageous for establishing relationships and, eventually, for building nations (Abrahams, 2016).

10. Conclusions and Recommendations

The two-way symmetrical model is the best because it emphasises honest information exchanges between the public and the government through interactive communication. Rather than persuasion, this model emphasises understanding and responsibility. Research is used by the two-way asymmetrical model to understand its target audiences and determine which messages will most effectively reach them and produce the desired results for the government. In order to effectively communicate with both internal and external target audiences and advance the agenda for nation-building, the South African government should employ communication techniques.

The government can create and maintain enduring relationships with the public based on mutual trust by implementing participatory communication approaches to nation-building. This involves keeping the public knowledgeable about recent policy issues and providing support for the growth of civil society. This could be accomplished nationally by holding productive discussions with the public, including opposition parties, NGOs, and activist groups, in order to support the media's efforts to promote free speech and improve the lives of all South Africans. The South African government can help create a united nation and demonstrate to the world that the country is dedicated to remaining a success story while also being fully committed to democratisation by prioritising participatory communication as a relationship function and utilising its carefully crafted strategies and tactics.

To further South Africa's nation-building objectives, the government should take into consideration the following recommendations for better government communication. Government should prioritize communication as its primary strategic component, the government can improve the efficacy of the communication aspect of nation-building. The government of South Africa could also hire qualified specialists in civil service communication, who could offer methods for developing a robust and committed government communication system.

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Authors contributions

Dr. EFA and Prof. MC were responsible for study design and revising. Dr. EFA and Prof. MC were responsible for data collection. Dr. EFA drafted the manuscript and Prof. MC revised it. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript. The authors contributed equally to the study.

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